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ABSTRACT

High dropout rates among language-minority secondary school students are one indication that many schools are failing to adequately support the needs of these students. The belief that the student dropout rate is due to a lack of proficiency in English often leads educators to overlook the economic, cultural, academic, and personal issues that immigrant adolescents must confront on a daily basis. To be effective, programs must begin with a compassionate understanding of these students and recognize and build on the identity, language, and knowledge they already possess. Instruction developed for native-English-speaking students may not be appropriate for students who are still learning English. To engage immigrant adolescents in school, educators must provide them with avenues to explore and strengthen their ethnic identities and languages while developing their ability to study and work in this country. This digest discusses 10 principles for developing effective teaching and learning contexts for immigrant adolescents and profiles one program that has been successful in promoting the academic success of its students by implementing these principles. (Author/VWL)

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Engaging Immigrant Students in Secondary Schools

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Strategies for Success
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AÍDA WALQUI, WEST ED, SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

High dropout rates among language-minority secondary school students are one indication that many schools are failing to adequately support the needs of these students. The belief that student dropout is due to a lack of proficiency in English often leads educators to overlook the economic, cultural, academic, and personal issues that immigrant adolescents must confront on a daily basis. To be effective, programs must begin with a compassionate understanding of these students and recognize and build on the identity, language, and knowledge they already possess. Instruction developed for native-English-speaking students may not be appropriate for students who are still learning English. To engage immigrant adolescents in school, educators must provide them with avenues to explore and strengthen their ethnic identities and languages while developing their ability to study and work in this country.

This digest discusses 10 principles for developing effective teaching and learning contexts for immigrants adolescents and profiles one program that has been successful in promoting the academic success of its students by implementing these principles.

Ten Principles of Effective Instruction for Immigrant Students

1. The culture of the classroom fosters the development of a community of learners, and all students are part of that community.

Immigrant teenagers bring a variety of experiences to the classroom that, if tapped, can serve as a springboard for new explorations that enrich everyone's experience. In effective classrooms, teachers and students together construct a culture that values the strengths of all participants and respects their interests, abilities, languages, and dialects. Students and teachers shift among the roles of expert, researcher, learner, and teacher, supporting themselves and each other.

2. Good language teaching involves conceptual and academic development.

Effective English as a second language (ESL) classes focus on themes and develop skills that are relevant to teenagers and to their studies in mainstream academic classes. Immigrant students need to learn not only new content, but also the language and discourse associated with the discipline. Therefore, all subject matter classes must have a language focus as well.

Effective teaching prepares students for high-quality academic work by focusing their attention on key processes and ideas and engaging them in interactive tasks that allow them to practice using these processes and concepts. ESL teachers need to know the linguistic, cognitive, and academic demands that they are preparing their students for and help them develop the necessary proficiencies. Content-area teachers need to determine the core knowledge and skills that these students need to master.

3. Students' experiential backgrounds provide a point of departure and an anchor in the exploration of new ideas.

Immigrant adolescents know a great deal about the world, and this knowledge can provide the basis for understanding new concepts in a new language. Students will learn new concepts and language only when they build on previous knowledge and understanding. Some students have been socialized into lecture and recitation approaches to teaching, and they expect teachers to tell them what lessons are about. But by engaging in activities that involve predicting, inferring based on prior knowledge, and supporting conclusions with evidence, students will realize that they can learn actively and that working in this way is fun and stimulating.

4. Teaching and learning focus on substantive ideas that are organized cyclically.

To work effectively with English learners, teachers must select the themes and concepts that are central to their discipline and to the curriculum. The curriculum should be organized around the cyclical reintroduction of concepts at progressively higher levels of complexity and interrelatedness. Cyclical organization of subject matter leads to a natural growth in the understanding of ideas and to gradual correction of misunderstandings.

5. New ideas and tasks are contextualized.

English language learners often have problems trying to make sense of decontextualized language. This situation is especially acute in the reading of textbooks. Secondary school textbooks are usually linear, dry, and dense, with few illustrations. Embedding the language of textbooks in a meaningful context by using manipulatives, pictures, a few minutes of a film, and other types of realia can make language comprehensible to students. Teachers may also provide context by creating analogies based on students' experiences. However, this requires that the teacher learn about students' backgrounds, because metaphors or analogies that may work well with native English speakers may not clarify meanings for English language learners. In this sense, good teachers of immigrant students continually search for metaphors and analogies that bring complex ideas closer to the students' world experiences.

6. Academic strategies, sociocultural expectations, and academic norms are taught explicitly.

Effective teachers develop students' sense of autonomy through the explicit teaching of strategies that enable them to approach academic tasks successfully. The teaching of such metacognitive strategies is a way of scaffolding instruction; the goal is to gradually hand over responsibility to the learners as they acquire skills and knowledge.

Delpit (1995) argues that the discourse of power—the language used in this country to establish and maintain social control—should also be taught explicitly, because it is not automatically acquired. Guidance and modeling can go a long way toward promoting awareness of and facility with this discourse. For example, preferred and accepted ways of talking, writing, and presenting are culture specific. Developing student awareness of differences, modeling by teachers of preferred styles, and study by students themselves of differences and preferred styles are three steps in the development of proficiency and autonomy that need to be included in the education of language minority students.

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7. Tasks are relevant, meaningful, engaging, and varied.

Some research indicates that most classes for immigrant students are monotonous, teacher-fronted, and directed to the whole class; teacher monologues are the rule (Ramírez & Merino, 1990). If students do not interact with each other, they do not have opportunities to construct their own understandings and often become disengaged. Because immigrant students are usually well behaved in class, teachers are not always aware that they are bored and are not learning. Good classes for immigrant students not only provide them with access to important ideas and skills, but also engage them in their own constructive development of understandings.

8. Complex and flexible forms of collaboration maximize learners' opportunities to interact while making sense of language and content.

Collaboration is essential for second language learners, because to develop language proficiency they need opportunities to use the language in meaningful, purposeful, and enticing interactions (Kagan & McGroarty, 1993). Collaborative work needs to provide every student with substantial and equitable opportunities to participate in open exchange and elaborated discussions. It must move beyond simplistic conceptions that assign superficial roles, such as being the "go getter" or the "time keeper" for the group (Adger et al., 1995). In these collaborative groups, the teacher is no longer the authority figure. Students work autonomously, taking responsibility for their own learning. The teacher provides a task that invites and requires each student's participation and hands over to the students the responsibility for accomplishing the task or solving the problem.

9. Students are given multiple opportunities to extend their understandings and apply their knowledge.

One of the goals of learning is to be able to apply acquired knowledge to novel situations. For English learners, these applications reinforce the development of new language, concepts, and academic skills as students actively draw connections between pieces of knowledge and their contexts. Understanding a topic of study involves being able to carry out a variety of cognitively demanding tasks (Perkins, 1993).

10. Authentic assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning.

Assessment should be done not only by teachers, but also by learners, who assess themselves and each other. Considerable research supports the importance of self-monitoring of language learning (O'Malley & Chamot, 1989). Authentic assessment activities engage second language learners in self-directed learning, in the construction of knowledge through disciplined inquiry, and in the analysis of problems they encounter.

Calexico High School: Restructuring for Success

Calexico High School in Calexico, California, is attempting to put the principles described above into practice. Calexico is a bilingual/bicultural community on the southern border of the United States; 98% of the students are Latino, and 80% are English language learners.

Once an unsupportive environment for English language learners, Calexico High School now operates with a philosophy that is based on such principles as respect for students' culture, language, and background; a strong belief that all students can learn; and equal opportunities for all students to pursue further education. Calexico staff view bilingualism as an asset for the future and strive to develop academic proficiency, regardless of language. They have eliminated the tracking system and have high expectations for all students.

An efficient system of counseling is in place that provides support ranging from interventions to sustain or improve academic success to coordination with agencies outside the school that provide social services. Groups of students are organized into academies and supervised by teams of teachers to help all students feel connected academically. In addition, the school actively involves parents by holding all school meetings in Spanish and English and by having bilingual/bicultural staff that develop and maintain connections between home and school.

Learning English is given utmost importance. However, teachers realize that developing second language fluency is a long process, and that while it is essential to continue supporting and nurturing language development, cognitive growth also has an impact on long-range academic outcomes. Strong support is given to continuous development of students' academic skills.

Three language options are available for required courses: They may be taught through Spanish, English, or sheltered English. The same number of credits are granted for all options, and all options provide academically challenging study for students that will open doors to postsecondary education and other opportunities.

Through their commitment to providing all students with more opportunities to succeed, the staff at Calexico High School have created a highly effective secondary school program for immigrant students. (For a description of other successful secondary school programs for immigrant students, see Walqui, 2000).

Conclusion

The 10 principles of effective programs discussed in this digest can contribute to the success of immigrant secondary school students by creating positive and engaging learning contexts. A strong commitment to the educational success of immigrant students is ultimately the foundation for all successful programs. For society, this commitment involves supporting the development of effective programs through resources, funding, professional development, and research.

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